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ABSTRACT

The range of teacher opinion concerning the worth of behavioral objectives for English is wide. The subject has provoked a great amount of heated discussion and has resulted in the resignation of at least one leading educational official. (CK)

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BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES: VIETNAM FOR THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM?

by RICHARD O. ULIN

"Look, you can argue all you want about behavioral objectives—whether they're the answer to all our problems or whether they're just another fad. But make no mistake about it. They're here. I'm in this room for only one reason. I'm here to find out where I get a set of them—and fast! At our last faculty meeting last Wednesday my superintendent told me to show up at a meeting next Tuesday with a full set of behavioral objectives for English, K-12. Just what do you suggest I do?"

"Make him happy. Dress up your old objectives in behavioral terms."

"Make a few phone calls and get a set from some system that has already done it."

"Just write to the Instructional Objectives Exchange in Los Angeles for their package."

"Simply refuse."

The above interchange, practically verbatim, I heard at one section meeting of the NCTE annual conference in Atlanta this past November. With variations, I heard it repeated in countless other meetings and corridor conversations. Teachers who arrived in Atlanta already opposed to the Movement acquired a sense that across the land the behavioral objectivists, like a plague of locusts, were already devouring our green fields. In fact, by their presence on our platforms some had obviously made inroads into the prestigious professional associations themselves. Other teachers who came hoping that the convention would recognize behavioral objectives as a means of clarifying the muddle we have called English and also as an effective tool for rallying public support for our ends left appalled at what they saw as a groundswell of unthinking reaction. Those who came either without bias or blissfully unaware of the issue were struck by both the pervasiveness of the problem and the passionate rhetoric it aroused. The usual kind of oratory and breast-beat-

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ing the conventioneer expected on questions of censorship, pornography, electronic media, Black Literature and linguistics, he was surprised to find shifted to the hitherto academic and innocuous process of phrasing objectives.

Although it is not the most agile of organizations, the NCTE had nevertheless scented the rising storm well in advance of the Atlanta meetings. Its Commission on the English Curriculum had studied the question and had reported cautiously that while it "by no means condemns the writing of behavioral objectives," it felt "compelled to warn the profession against premature and unsophisticated attempts."[1] Was the Commission taking the position of a medical board and suggesting that until the profession reached a higher level of technical expertise, practitioners should not attempt heart transplants? Or was it suggesting that possibilities do exist now for highly skilled practitioners to perform the operation, but only when particular conditions are present and understood? Whatever the inference to be drawn, still without condemning the movement, the NCTE then picked up and amplified the storm signal by passing a resolution at its fall 1969 convention which still refrained from condemning he practice:

> "Resolved, That those who propose to employ behavioral objectives be urged to engage in a careful appraisal of the possible benefits and the present limitation of behavioral definitions of English with reference to the humanistic aims which have traditionally been valued in this discipline."[2]

In the spring the NCTE announced that John Maxwell, Director of the Commission on the English Curriculum, and Anthony Tovatt had edited a monograph titled *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English.* Requests for the publication poured in from teachers, some looking for information on where the NCTE really stood on behavioral objectives, others wanting a Baedecker on how to get on with the business of writing them. The chances are that few in either group had their expectations met. As provocative, engrossing, and comprehensive as the little volume is, it did not take or claim to take a stand, nor did it provide a set of easy-to-follow instructions. What it succeeded in doing, both in Maxwell's opening narrative as well as in the ten individually authored papers that follow, was to pose the problem sharply, put it in perspective, point to concomitant issues and raise the general anxiety level of the profession to the point where it exploded at the 1970 convention. Out of that convention one might have expected some Jovian thunderbolt. What emerged was yet another resolution, more shrill than the

1969 original, but still somewhat equivocating. The resolution insists "That when members of the NCTE are put in the position to use or develop behavioral objectives, they secure satisfactory answers supported by adequate evidence to the following questions among others." What follow are seven basically rhetorical questions e.g. "Who has the professional and moral right to predetermine and control what shall or shall not be the limits of acceptable behavior of young people? In short, do we help students grow or shape them to a mold?" In a convention setting political conditions are generally conducive to the emergence of bloodless party platforms, and perhaps one should rather be surprised at the transparent quality of the hostility contained in the resolution's language.

One may ask what there is about behavioral objectives, other than their unwise imposition or premature installation, which rouses such hostility at these gatherings of the faithful? Most educators, including English teachers, would, I think, agree with W. James Popham that "The quality of any instructional sequence must be evaluated primarily in terms of its ability to promote desirable changes in the intended learner."[3] Most of us would also probably agree with Robert F. Mager, founding father of the movement, that "When *clearly defined* goals are lacking, it is impossible to evaluate a course or program *efficiently*, and there is no sound basis for selecting appropriate materials, content, or instructional methods."[4] No one can dispute the fact that until he knows what he intends to accomplish with it, a machinist cannot select a tool. These are statements to which we can readily pledge allegiance. However, such a pledge in no way obligates us to subscribe to a definition of our goals or an evaluation of our English programs in the terms demanded by Popham, Mager and the behavioral objectivists.

In one Massachusetts town I know, call it Greenville, an enlightened and in many ways an advantaged community, the staff took the job of writing behavioral objectives as seriously and worked as long and as hard as Mager and Popham warn us is necessary. Religiously they obeyed Mager's injunction against using "words open to many interpretations" e.g. *to know, to understand, to appreciate, to enjoy, to believe* and phrased their terminal objectives in "words open to fewer interpretations" e.g. *to write, to recite, to identify, to list.*[5] The latter, we are advised, are words to use if we wish to force ourselves to identify and define the terminal pupil-behaviors our instruction is designed to produce. In this way, we are told, we can avoid taking the traditional humanist dodge i.e. hiding behind goals so stated that they defy objective measurement.

Now let's take a sampling of the behavioral objectives the Green-

ville staff produced for seventh grade English classes. First those for Poetry:

1. Given a poem to read, the student will demonstrate a knowledge of rhyme scheme by writing the rhyme scheme of the poem. This must be done correctly at least 90% of the time.
2. Given a poem to read and 4 themes, the student will demonstrate a knowledge of the underlying theme (controlling idea) by choosing the appropriate theme for the poem. This must be done correctly at least 80% of the time.
3. Giiven a poem to read and 4 moods, the student will demonstrate a knowledge of mood (created atmosphere) by choosing the correct mood for the poem. This must be done correctly at least 80% of the time.

No one is likely to quarrel with instruction designed to help children respond more fully to rhyme or to sensing poetic moods and controlling ideas. But large questions may be asked about the propriety of judging the success or failure of a month's immersion in poetry on the basis of whether youngsters measure up either to these or any other three "objective" criteria. How much pride should we take in a student's choosing 80% of the time that option *we* decide is "correct" among the four *we* decide to give him? Who is to pick the poems? On what grounds are they to be chosen? Who is to phrase the options and determine the optimal choice? On what grounds does one decide arbitrarily that 80% or 90% of "correct" responses defines "successsful performance" i.e. the attainment of our objectives?

Do we really agree with Mager that "the best statement [of an objective] is the one that excludes the greatest number of possible alternatives to your goal?"[6] In drama we find a single all-embracing objective:

> "Given a short play to read and five sentences explaining elements within the play, the student will demonstrate a knowledge of the elements (plot, tone, setting, theme, the character) by matching the description with the appropriate element. This must be done correctly at least 80% of the time.

What does this statement of "performance" actually mean? Once the student has read a play, are the testers to hand him five sentences, each purporting to explain the significance of one of the five elements in the play assigned? or in any play? What kind of "descriptions" of what is he then supposed to label *plot, tone,* etc.? Incidentally I should be rather uneasy at this point if the writers of this "objective" were to take Mager at his word and relax when he says, "If you give each learner a copy of your objectives you may not have much else to do."[7]

In composition we find the writers struggling valiantly to use the new terminology and in so doing oscillating between global statements which defy definition, let alone measurement, and statements which provide illusory possibilities of concrete measurement. Announced vaguely as the Overall Objective is the admonition: "The student will communicate his experience effectively in writing." With equal fuzziness, the general objective for a particular unit on Descriptive Paragraphs declares: "The student will write paragraphs that effectively describe the items he intends." Terminal objectives call for the student to write paragraphs "90% free" of such errors as run-on sentences, fragments, dangling modifiers, etc., on such topics as "a single object of your choice," and "a scene of your choice." Are terminal objectives, even such pedestrian ones as these, actually measurable in percentage figures? Do we now have, or should we even try to develop, instruments that will tell us when paragraphs are 90% fat-free? Certainly we are dissatisfied with the results of our current modes of instruction. But in order to demonstrate results in concrete terms, are we really ready to abandon the larger, often non-cognitive aims of English instruction: developing in our students aesthetic sensibility, creativity, empathy and imagination, helping them make sense of themselves and their world?

If I have been harsh with the particular performance criteria I have described, it is not because they are bad—they are probably better than most. At least they have the virtue of having been developed by the teachers who plan to try them; they were not picked up hurriedly like TV dinners at the frozen-food counter to make do in an emergency. In the process of formulating them, I would agree with Mager, teachers may have reached a new level of awareness of what they have been about, of how much of their time has been devoted to trivia. Ironic and distressing, however, is the fact that with tools as unsophisticated as those we now have for measuring affective and humanistic gains, when we subscribe to goals in strictly behavioral terms and count our successes only in observable, measureable phenomena, we enthrone the very trivia we deplore.

Those who would dismiss the whole behavioral objectives movement as just another passing fad are, I believe, underestimating its strength. As Sue Brett of the USOE's Center for Research and Development says, "At this moment the Office of Education is up to its ears in behavioral objectives."[8] When she also says, as she did at the NCTE convention in Atlanta, that in order to satisfy the taxpayer we must have some way statistically to measure what the schools—and English classes —accomplish and therefore we must have behavioral objectives to mea-

sure against, the reasons behind the groundswell begin to come through. Money for education we know is tight and obviously getting tighter. Since Sputnik federal, state and local agencies have expended gigantic sums on projects like compensatory education. Disappointed in observable results, legislative bodies and the public are insisting on "accountability." One attempt to meet this demand is the National Assessment of Educational Achievement, a massive project, finally airborne after a rough takeoff. Another is the statewide student achievement appraisal announced by Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, Neil Sullivan.

It is not hard to account for the pressures which lead educators to apply what look like hard-headed cost accounting procedures to the instructional program. In a business-dominated society the techniques of the systems analyst, the old efficiency expert now armed with a computer, look particularly appealing. Though he was referring to an earlier period in American education, Raymond Callahan might well have been describing the current situation in *Education and The Cult of Efficiency:* "What was unexpected was the extent, not only of the power of the business-industrial groups, but of the strength of the business ideology in the American culture on the one hand and the extreme weakness and vulnerability of schoolmen, especially school administrators, on the other."[9] In his scholarly but impassioned work Callahan insists that education is not a business, that the school is not a factory, that students are not products. Some thirty years ago one of Franklin Bobbitt's disciples drew up a list of 1581 social objectives for English, and today we see ascendant once again what James Hoetker calls "specificationism."[10] Lo, the wheel has been reinvented—this time on a behavioralist axle. Once more the danger is that, however efficient the wheel, schools and children may suffer.

Pressured by tax-conscious Congressmen and school committeemen to show tangible results, it is not surprising that educators borrow the human engineering tools industry and the military find useful. Hence the technocratic talk of "pipelines," "flow charts," "inputs and outputs," "feedback" and "performance criteria." Hence the Rube Goldberg schematics and the Donald Barthelme parodies they have produced. Hence the insistence on objectives only in terms of conveniently observable behaviors. The fact that such an approach may prove fruitful in the field of vocational education, with its primary emphasis on salable skills, provides no assurance that it will enhance a well conceived program in the humanities. As John Dixon has pointed out, we have moved in stages from a model of English which once centered on skills at a time when literacy was our essential need; to a model which focused on the cultural

heritage, when we were most in need of the cohesive and civilizing effects of content; to our current model (hopefully) which stresses self expression and personal growth. While the behavioralists' tools might have applied with some efficacy to the two earlier models, they can, as I see them at their present level of sophistication, only retard the development of the third, the personal growth model enunciated at the Dartmouth Seminar in the summer of 1966.

What saddens me is the distinct possibility that this highly promising development, now showing real signs of revitalizing English programs across the country, will be swept away in the rising tide of behavioralism. USOE dollars which flow only to projects and systems subscribing to the behavioral format will be hard to resist. If students are to be judged on the "concrete" evidence provided by their attainment of specific behavioral objectives, it will not be long before teachers, knowing their fate rests on their students' meeting these circumscribed criteria, will focus their teaching on measurable, albeit insignificant, learning.

Perhaps we can take hope in the fact that English teachers have always proved stubbornly resilient and resourceful in the face of external pressure. Under the present circumstances perhaps their agility with language will enable them to have their cake and eat it too, to pursue the personal growth model in their instructional programs and still satisfy the clamor of the times by couching their activities in behavioral terms. This is a dangerous but, so some think, a necessary expedient. It reminds me of the veteran actor who confided to his apprentice the secret of his own success. "I have found," he said, "that the most important thing in acting is *honesty*. And once you've learned to fake that, you have it made."

At least one scholar committed to the Dartmouth Seminar recommendations, however, refuses to "fake it." James Moffett, author of the highly influential *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13* agreed in 1969 to serve as a consultant on the Tri-University BOE Project, a carefully conceived, well directed, and bountifully funded USOE attack on the knotty problem of writing behavioral objectives for English. However skeptical he may have been about the possibilities of designing behavioral objectives to fit a humanistic curriculum, he must have accepted the plausible argument that the English profession, whatever its misgivings, had better tackle the job itself. A year later, still respecting the integrity of the project directors but convinced of the inadequacy of *any* formulation of behavioral objectives for English concerns and appalled by the potential damage to be done English instruc-

tion by the application of principles of operant-conditioning, he left the project.

Bitter about what he considers unwarranted government pressure, he wrote in resigning:

> "In short, we are being MacNamara-ed, and we should fight it. But, I am told, if we don't write these behavioral objectives, "they" will. If this is true, then let's recognize this for just what it is—extortion. Lend your name and support to this project or else you-know-who will write these objectives instead of you. I simply cannot accept these conditions. I respect the directors of BOE, appreciate their good intentions, and sympathize with their own conflicts about possibly contradictory commitments, but with the submission of this position paper I must withdraw from the project."[11]

However one interprets it, Moffett's personal action should serve as a warning. It should make us think long and carefully before we commit ourselves and our schools to a course of action which clamors for total involvement, which will resist deescalation, and from which we may later find it impossible to make any "honorable" withdrawal.

FOOTNOTES

1 John Maxwell and Anthony Tovatt, eds., *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English.* (Campaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1970), p. ix.
2 Maxwell, pp. ix-x.
3 James W. Popham, "The Instructional Objectives Exchange: New Support for Criterion-Referenced Instruction, "Phi Delta Kappan, 52 (November 1970), pp. 174.
4 Robert F. Mager, *Preparing Instructional Objectives.* (Palo Alto, California: Fearon Publishers, 1962), p. 174.
5 Mager, p. 11.
6 Mager, p. 53.
7 Maxwell, p. 43.
8 Maxwell, p. 50.
9 Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. vii-viii.
10 Maxwell, p. 50.
11 Maxwell, p. 116.

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